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ABSTRACT

Transitivity in the English verb is examined from the perspectives of the linguistic theorist and the second language instructor. English verbs can be assigned to one of six categories: pure intransitives, causative-inchoative verbs, psych-movement verbs, cross-classification verbs, direct object deletions, and pure transitives. Both syntacticians and English as a second language teachers face theoretical problems in determing the boundaries between these categories and defining membership in each category. Given the difficulty of categorization, the theorist is unable to state a rule for the teacher to use in the classroom, and the behavior of verbs with respect to transitivity must be viewed as unpredictable. The properties of each of the six categories are described, demonstrating that transitivity/intransitivity is a continuum rather than a dichotomy. However, enough is known about this continuum to permit both theorists and teachers to determine how aspects of verb behavior can be introduced in the classroom. (RW)

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RULE AND ROLE IN SECOND-LANGUAGE TEACHING

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There are certain issues in linguistics that have bearing not only on theoretical formulations, but also on the application of linguistic knowledge in the area of second-language teaching. In this paper I want to examine one such issue, one under debate for all the years I have been in the field with no evident solution in sight, yet one which affects the way everyone, from the most abstract formal theorist to the classroom ESL teacher, looks at language. Depending on one's individual interests and perspective, one may word the question in various ways, but it remains the same.

Theorists -- generative grammarians, for instance -- view it as axiomatic that a grammar is composed of generalizations -- abstract rules. The most desirable "explanatorily adequate" -- grammar was one with the most general statements and, therefore, the fewest rules. (Of course, no such grammar has ever actually been produced, but we would presumably know it when we saw it.)

This is a revised version of a keynote address delivered at the CATESOL State Conference in Sacramento, March, 1982.

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People closer to the practical classroom experience look at the situation differently. For them, a language seems best described -- that is, most eminently teachable -- as a list of phenomena: concrete entities, rather than abstract formulations which the student has to decode. Better a list of irregular verbs than a set of rules telling how to form such verbs. Here, simplicity and economy are not the criteria -- retention of information is.

These assumptions go beyond the simple question of how to present the facts of a language. They involve the very notion of what a language is. The question really is, "What is the grammar? How are regularities to be formulated?" If we take the two positions as two ways of answering this question, we will arrive at diametrically opposite theoretical positions on what a language is -- that is, what speakers have inside their minds and draw on in order to speak and understand utterances. Of course, these positions are straw men: most rational people in either camp would take a more hedged position: language is predominantly one or the other; or, when in doubt, present the phenomenon as one, or the other. But even this is a strong and interesting theoretical claim.

It might also be argued that I have confounded apples and aardvarks: the first is a truly theoretical position, the second non-theoretical, but rather pragmatic. True, the latter statement arises out of the teacher's classroom needs, not directly out of a desire to formulate a philosophical position. But that doesn't mean that there is no implicit theoretical claim in this "practical" statement. For if we say that students learn better when information is presented to be learned by rote, we are making claims about the psychological organization underlying and facilitating language learning. Chomsky, it will be recalled, made just the opposite claim (arguing with Skinner) about first-language learning. As a result of Chomsky's (and his followers') desire to differentiate themselves from behaviorists, they adopted a stronger pure-generalization position than the facts might actually justify. Perhaps, alternately, first and second-language learning are entirely different processes. But all of these are theoretical statements that deserve closer inspection.

One scholar who has, over many years, questioned the Chomskyan position in detail and with sensitivity is Dwight Bolinger. From his early papers (e.g., (1962)), to the recent "Meaning and Memory" (1976) Bolinger has asked the question, How much linguistic behavior is truly "rule governed" in the transformational sense? In the earlier work he argued that while it was often possible to reduce linguistic phenomena to general and abstract statements, often those ingenious-sounding statements were not good descriptions of what really occurred in language: they worked, in some sense, but obscured what was actually going on. They were, that is, engineering solutions

but not real science. In his more recent paper, Bolinger makes a parallel argument. Again he takes phenomena that could be (and have been) described in terms of general rules, and shows that our intuitions are better matched if we consider them as rote, or list, phenomena. Bolinger argues perceptively that we have too often in the last 20 years been seduced by the blandishments of "explanatory adequacy" and "generalization" into overlooking the subtleties and peculiarities that contribute so much to the "genius" of a language, or to the fluency of a speaker.

Of course, the question I have posed -- is language organized in the mind as a list of phenomena or a set of abstract rules? -- is itself deceptive and apt to lead us into absurdities if we take it very seriously. But we should realize that this way of looking at things, dichotomization, is as fashionable in academic debate as it has ever been, despite evidence from every area of scholarly endeavor that very little in nature or anywhere else is truly dichotomizable; rather, everything is better understood in terms of continua, of infinitely divisible sets of possibilities. So let us understand the ensuing discussion in that spirit: given that almost every aspect of language we look at will be advantageously looked at now from one perspective, now from another, and sometimes from both simultaneously; nonetheless, sometimes it will be more enlightening to concentrate on abstract-rule governed behavior, sometimes on rote-learning through lists.

With these caveats in mind, I want to look at one aspect of English structure to see where it works best to view it from one perspective, where from the other. I will examine some phenomena that are on the one hand very basic, obvious, and well-studied; and on the other, as we shall see, complex and mysterious. Our exercise today concerns transitivity in English verb.

Established wisdom, and any dictionary, tell us that it is a simple matter in English to determine whether a verb is transitive or intransitive. If it can be followed by a noun phrase, it is the former, otherwise the latter. And further, any verb, on inspection (with perhaps a few exceptions) can be assigned to one category or the other. Moreover, a transitive verb, because it occurs with a direct object, can undergo passivization, as an intransitive verb of course cannot. This is a convenient means of taxonomizing and an intuitive way to look at a large set of linguistic phenomena -- the English verb system -- in such a way that it is orderly, a virtue both for theorists and for language teachers. But alas, as with so many ideals, this one does not endure on inspection.

While it is an easy matter to produce sentences in which given verbs are used transitively, or intransitively, it is extraordinarily difficult to give a list of verbs that themselves are always only one or the other. In fact, we can assign English verbs to any of five categories, from pure intransitive

on the far left, to pure transitive on the far right, these two being the least common; in between there are four mixed types, as illustrated in the chart below:

ENGLISH VERB TRANSITIVITY

I pure intrans.	II caus.-incho.	III psych-movt.	IV cross-class.
come	start	surprise	read
go	stop	disgust	sleep
	begin	amuse	eat
	end	enrage	drive
	grow	baffle	handle
	increase	interest	
	extend	fascinate	

V Do-del	Vi pure trans.
eat	way
read	need
write	have
handle	hit
	love
	like
	want

Syntacticians, like ESL teachers, have very real theoretical problems because of the difficulties in determining the boundaries between these categories, involving the difficulty of defining membership in each category: what do the members of, say Type II have in common with each other semantically that none of them shares with another category that functions differently? Clearly if we cannot find a way to differentiate among the categories, the behavior of verbs with respect to transitivity will have to be considered unpredictable, that is, non-rule-governed at least for our purposes. The problem is of equal seriousness for theorists and teachers, since if the theorist cannot state the generalization, obviously it cannot be available for teachers to use in the classroom. And one major difficulty we find in this categorization is that the various subcategories behave rather differently, and therefore cannot be considered as one giant class of verbs that are "unmarked for transitivity," or the like. We can run through the six categories to give examples of the properties of each.

TYPE I. PURE INTRANSITIVES. As noted, these are unexpectedly rare, perhaps in fact nonexistent, since even the few that we put with some confidence into this set show signs of bursting

out of it, sometimes with inner-accusative constructions like the British idiom, "go a journey" sometimes in idioms like "come a cropper," "go halves." A verb that firmly belonged in this class would never be followed by a noun phrase functioning as direct object, and would never occur in a passive form. Come and go seem, in current American English, to be fairly safe representatives of this category, but it would not be surprising to see even these eventually acquire transitive uses.

TYPE II. CAUSATIVE-INCHOATIVE VERBS. In this set we have verbs which lexically occur in both transitive and intransitive forms with different (though related) meanings in each. For some, one may be commoner or more idiomatic. The generalization is that all the verbs assigned to this category are semantically verbs built on a stative concept whose meaning involves a change of state. In their transitive use, their direct objects undergo the change: intransitively, their subjects participate in the process. Thus, for instance, if we take a verb like increase, we see that it is related to a state-of-being, "be large." Increase, then, means either "cause to become large (trans.)" or "become large (intrans.)" With burn related to "be on fire," we see an interesting split in distributional possibilities. With increase, transitive and intransitive covered roughly the same semantic ground; anything that could increase could equally well be described as being increased by some other force. With burn, as pointed out to me by Margaret Newman, the transitive covers a wider range of possible territory than does the intransitive. The transitive can be used to describe both complete burning ("burning up" or "burning down,") as in

John burned the house (="consumed ... by fire.")

or partial burning, as in

John burned his finger (="subjected ... to fire.")

But the intransitive normally has only the first, completive, meaning.

The house burned.

*John's finger burned.

(Unless, in the second case, it was so badly burned that it was no longer in existence.) Our problem, then, in understanding this category, is twofold: determining the set of items to assign to the class, and differentiating between those (like increase) where the transitive-intransitive pair are essentially identical in properties, and those like burn, where additional information must be given if they are to be used appropriately. We might give a general rule in the first case: any verb whose meaning involves a change of state is a candidate for assignment to Category II. But there are many exceptions: verbs of change of state which occur only in one or the other meaning. An example is dispel:

The policeman dispelled our fears.

*Our fears dispelled.

(Compare, in this respect, the semantically very similar disperse:

The policeman dispersed the crowd.

The crowd dispersed.)[2]

It is clear, then, that a general rule would be helpful as a start, since types like disperse outnumber those like dispel, but a list of exceptions would nonetheless have to be supplied. If we are interested in the future development of the English verb, we might wish to flag dispel as one in which we are likely to see a change before too long, in the direction of wider usability and greater conformity to the general rule for verbs of this semantic class.

As for the second problem, this is trickier, especially as we are dealing with more than two variables, and those imprecisely defined. The special cases (like burn) will probably have to be presented in the classroom as a list, since there seems to be no generalization available to distinguish between those and the commoner, increase types.

TYPE III. PSYCH-MOVEMENT. This category was given much attention by generative grammarians in the late '60's and early '70's. (See, for instance, Lakoff (1970) and Postal (1971).) In these verbs, unlike those in the last category, the shift between transitive and intransitive arises out of their semantic structure, where in Type II, it was correlated with meaning, but extrinsically. (There is no obvious reason why change-of-state should entail the likelihood of transitive and intransitive behavior sharing one lexical form.)

Also, in Type II verbs, we found a true intransitive-transitive relation: the same types of noun phrases as can occur in the subject position with intransitives occur as direct objects of transitives. In Type III, however, we do not see this clear semantic relationship, but a more complex situation.

These verbs were originally called Flips on account of their ability to switch their syntactic behavior. They, like Type II, involve a specific semantic category, which gives rise to their most common name: these are verbs representing a psychological, typical emotional state: surprise, astonish, dismay, delight, disgust are examples. (Like and seem are often considered anomalous members of the category.) Verbs of physical perception (look, smell, feel, sound) are also considered at least related, and perhaps members of the class. What is interesting about verbs of this class is that they show up in two forms: one, as apparent true "actives," or transitives which have normal passives associated with them; also as "pseudo-passives" actually intransitives that look almost like true English passives but

are not. But the "active" and "pseudo-passive" co-occur with different kinds of noun phrases. In the true transitive (i.e., passivizable) sense, persons are the subject, i.e., persons in their concrete representation, rather than in terms of their character or actions. As that is rather a confusing distinction, let me try to clarify it with examples.

1. True transitive. John surprised me (= "took me by surprise") by jumping out of the closet.

I was surprised by John when he jumped out of the closet.

It is John's sudden physical activity that "surprised" in this case.

2. Intransitive and prepositional phrase. Because this is much more complicated I will not here go through the many arguments used by generative semanticists for the existence of this type, and its underlying structure.

The reader may wonder at this point why I am treating psych-movement verbs as mixed with respect to transitivity. On first inspection, it might seem that the most logical way to treat the set is as simple transitives with an unimportant option in the passive for choice in the preposition of the agentive. But that would force us to overlook real differences between the true transitive passive and pseudo-passive (with preposition other than by), namely: 1) The true transitive is non-stative. It describes an activity as occurring at a point in time. Hence, it (and of course its corresponding true passive) can be used with a punctual-aspect form like the progressive, as the pseudo-passive cannot:

Bill was being surprised by the guests at the party when the Wicked Witch came in.

*Bill was being surprised at the guests at the party when the W.W. came in.

2) The class of nouns that can function as object of the preposition appears identical in the two types, but this appearance is deceptive. If we compare

I was surprised by John

I was surprised at John

we can see that in the first, the surprising is done by John in his physical person. But in the second, what is surprising is not John's concrete presence per se, but rather some aspect of John's behavior or character that contrasts with what I would have expected from John based on prior knowledge. (To use surprised by, I need never have encountered John before; with surprised at, I would have to have encountered him previously, at least by reputation.) Hence, we would argue that surprise (and the other verbs in this class) exist in two forms: a

transitive, with normal by-passive, non-stative and selecting simple concrete nouns (among others) as subject; and an intransitive, occurring with obligatory prepositional phrase, stative, and selecting complex abstract noun phrases (e.g., the way John acted) as subject, generally reduced to the head noun (John) alone.

CATEGORY IV. CROSS-CLASSIFICATION VERBS. As the name indicates, whatever it is that links these verbs together as a group, or whether we are in fact talking about a cohesive, semantically identifiable set, is not really clear. What is clear is that there exist many verbs in English that are principally either transitive or intransitive, but under only a few rigorous conditions, can cross over into the other type. But it seems difficult to discover a single property that holds this group together, and in fact one could almost argue that any verb in English (at any rate, an extremely large set) may theoretically function this way. The question is how to determine which verbs cannot behave this way. In any event, this crossing-over appears to be very productive in modern English. While few new verbs are added to Category III, and not too many to II, we find more instances of these all the time. Interestingly, while changes in transitivity of Type II seem to originate as much in formal registers as elsewhere, first instances of Type IV crossing-over seem to occur most in informal genres (for instance, sports reporting and advertising). Aside from this, there seem to be few safe generalizations about the verbs in this group. Moreover, it seems not entirely safe to assign asterisks to forms to suggest that they could not exist, since many of those confidently so marked will probably pop up in the media over the next few years.

Examples range from types that are pretty securely ensconced in standard American English to nonce-forms that, encountered in a television commercial, may cause a purist to wince -- this time around, anyway. Let us consider some examples:

This book reads easily.

The bed sleeps two.

This is the soup that eats like a meal.

His car drives nicely.

The truck handles easily.

Among these, sleep is the anomalous case, although it seems semantically to match the others. It is, however, the only one that is regularly intransitive and here becomes (superficially) transitive. The others are all (superficially) intransitive here, but ordinarily are transitive. There are some pertinent facts about the other members of this class. They are verbs of rather basic meaning, most typically of native stock, and

rather often are members of verb category V as well: their normal direct objects are quite predictable, falling within a narrow semantic range. The cross-over only occurs under well-defined and rigorous syntactic conditions. There is virtually always an adverb present (sometimes a prepositional phrase that functions like an adverb). Most often, the adverb is easily, or closely related semantically (e.g., nicely, well). Syntactically, this is an unusual situation: a rule (or behavior) that crucially involves verbs and noun phrases (subjects and direct objects), yet the critical factor in determining whether that behavior can occur in a given sentence is the presence of an adverb of a very restricted set: manner adverbs that have to do with ease or difficulty. It is not apparent what to make of this, unless we consider another phenomenon that has been puzzling for a long time to syntactic theorists, and at first glance seems unrelated.

This is the rule that is sometimes called tough-movement (because tough is one of the adjectives that can trigger the process). This rule switches the underlying object of the main verb (usually) to surface position in the presence of an adjective or similar phrase involving ease or difficulty.

Sentences of this type were first brought to linguistic notice by Chomsky (1965), who pointed out that the two following sentences, though superficially similar, had very different kinds of structures underlying them:

John is eager to please.

John is easy to please.

While the first seemed pretty straightforward, with John as the subject of eager all through the derivation (hence, you can say, John is eager, in isolation), the second appeared to be more complex, with John underlyingly elsewhere in the sentence, and to please being in fact the underlying subject of easy. (Thus, we do not find *John is easy in isolation, but we do find, To please is easy - and not *To please is eager.) In the second sentence, John is thus logically the direct object of please, a curious phenomenon, since the only mechanism for the shifting of subject and object relations in English had been thought to be passivization. It was soon established that most transitive verbs could undergo this process; the decisive factor was the presence of an adjective or adverb of the appropriate semantic class. In some sentences, the shift could occur either with direct object or object of a preposition assuming surface subject position.

It is easy to play sonatas on this violin.

Sonatas are easy to play on this violin.

This violin is easy to play sonatas on.

And often adverbials could replace the adjective phrase:

This violin plays sonatas easily.

Sonatas play easily on this violin.

A great deal of time and pain have been spent on the rule of tough-movement, arguing for and against its existence as well as discussing precisely what it acts upon and how it does its work. For our purposes, we need only accept the idea that adjectives and adverbs (and related forms) of ease and difficulty trigger a shift in the relationships between verbs and their associated noun phrases, with the direct objects of transitives (and sometimes objects of prepositions) moving into derived-subject position, the logical subject being a complement sentence.

The choice of the adjective/adverb is actually broader and more complex than was stated at the outset:

It is unhealthy to eat candy; candy is unhealthy to eat.

It is interesting to talk to Fred; Fred is interesting to talk to.

But: It is unfair to keep the money; the money is unfair to keep.

In short, here is another potential generalization to which there are innumerable exceptions. Interestingly, although the class of adjectives that triggers tough-movement is quite large, the set of adverbs that behave this way seems much smaller:

Meat keeps easily but *Money keeps unfairly.

So, if we were to discuss tough-movement in the classroom, we would want to subdivide it, and point out that the rule is exceptionally productive in the adjective types, and rather less so with adverbs.

In any case, then, to summarize, a verb's membership in Type IV cannot be determined purely by its meaning or anything else peculiar to the verb. The presence of an adverbial of a specific semantic type is crucial if the rule is to operate. So the potential class of verbs which may be members of Type IV is very broad (and includes verbs which may be members of other classes as well) and the rule very productive; in fact, we might be better advised to list exceptions than to list members of the class, and we certainly cannot determine class membership in terms of any rigorous semantic properties. Compare this with Type II, for example, for which we can assign membership to a semantically distinctive, though large set of verbs, and the occurrence of switching of transitivity is based purely on the meaning of the verb itself. In fact, where a dictionary might be able to list, say, burn or increase under two heads, and commonly does (burn$_{vt}$ and burn$_{vi}$, for example) it does not make sense to list drive or eat this way. In Type II, the verbs do in fact semantically and logically switch categories; burn is either logically transitive, depending on whether it is followed by a direct object.

But for drive or play or any of our other Type IV cases, it makes much better sense to assume that their categorial representation has not changed. Superficially, and syntactically, they are intransitive in tough-movement sentences: but semantically, in terms of their underlying relationships with their associated noun phrases, they remain transitive. A sentence like The book reads easily, while syntactically intransitive because there is no direct object present, nonetheless semantically involves a transitive direct object relationship between read and book, which, while occupying subject position, is still logicaliy acted-upon, that is a direct object, of read. In this respect, the tough-movement relationship is very similar to that of passivization, while the causative-inchoative relationship is quite different.

TYPE V. Direct Object deletion. Here again we find normally transitive verbs occurring superficially as if intransitive (not followed by a direct object noun phrase). But here there is no switching of underlying objects to subject position: the logical subject continues to occupy that place. This category is restricted to those verbs whose direct objects are quite specifically inferrable from the meaning of the verb: thus, eat is a candidate, but have is not (there are relatively few things, and those closely related, that can be eaten, but a great many disparate things can be had). These can probably be taught by a general rule, of course, with examples. One interesting sidelight: while the object that is deleted with eat is understood as any unspecified kind of solid food, when the object of drink is deleted, the liquid will normally be assumed to be alcoholic. Thus compare:

John eats too much (= of any kind of comestible).

John drinks too much (= of alcoholic beverages).

Analogously, smoke with object-deletion refers in most segments of contemporary society only to tobacco. (I have been informed, incidentally, that among Mormons and other groups to whom they are forbidden, beverages containing caffeine are included in the membership of the class of nouns that may be understood with object-deleted drink: the example above might refer to John's overuse of coffee, tea, or Coca-cola.)

CLASS VI. Pure transitives. Here we have verbs which only occur followed by a direct-object noun phrase. As with Type I, these are rather rare, much rarer than one might be led to expect, although commoner than Type I. (The movement historically seems to be from intransitive to transitive, so that those verbs that start out as intransitive are more likely to develop transitive uses than vice versa.) This category, however, is not completely stable: verbs like hold seem to be acquiring intransitive uses in certain quarters:

John is holding = John is in possession of (illegal) drugs.[3]

Semantically, these verbs are in at least one respect the inverse of the last category: their meaning is vague, the range of objects with which they can occur broad, so that the object must be specified. (Say would appear to be an exception, however, since there are few things besides words that can be said.) But because the group is so diverse, a list might work better than a rule here (perhaps rather than listing cases all at once, when a verb in this category is taught, a notation might be given alongside it (e.g., ---+NP) to indicate that the direct object's presence is mandatory).

One might expect, too, that mandatorily-transitive verbs would always be subject to passivization; but curiously, among this set is one of the relatively few exceptions to this rule, have:

John has five dollars: *Five dollars are had by John.

Weigh, fit, and cost, sometimes cited as exceptions to passivization and also apparently pure-transitive (at least weigh and cost), are probably not to be analyzed this way; the apparent direct-object noun phrases that follow these verbs are probably better understood as adverbials.

I have tried in this discussion to give some illustrations of how the syntactician's problems in disentangling English verb transitivity are not unlike those faced by the ESL teacher in the classroom, and have suggested that the cases which the teacher finds most problematic -- hardest to know how to teach -- are so to the theorist as well, for much the same reasons. I have suggested that the transitive/intransitive distinction is not the dichotomy it is sometimes presented as, but rather a continuum with many interlocking possibilities: categories spread into one another, and verbs spill across categories, and beside the notions of transitivity and intransitivity are less easily specified in terms of syntactic cooccurrence than might have been believed. But the teacher, like the theorist, can make some order out of this chaos, since a good deal is understood, enough for many of our practical needs. Often we can intelligently select the method by which particular sorts of verbal behavior should be introduced in the classroom: by rule, by list, or by some combination -- on the basis of what syntactic theory tells us about the behavior of verbs in each of these categories.

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Peggy McCurdy, June McKay, and Margaret Newman for much insightful discussion and helpful examples.

[2] Causatives and inchoatives appear to be sensed by speakers of English as paired, so that if one is known to exist, there is a

likelihood that sooner or later the other will appear. Consider in this regard the synonymous verbs vanish and disappear, both intransitive. There has arisen colloquially, for the second, a corresponding transitive, as seen in

The cake disappeared. Who disappeared it?

and I would not be surprised first, to see vanish used in this way, and second, for both of these now-bordering transitives to become standard English.

Another curious, if idiosyncratic development: Julia Child on television, uttered the following sentence, not once but at least twice:

You can imbibe the savarin with the syrup.

Imbibe ordinarily occurs as a simple causative (not as an inchoative), as in:

The savarin imbibed the syrup.

*The syrup imbibed.

Child appears to have created a double causative, a construction not otherwise attested in my knowledge of English, but common in other languages (e.g., Sanskrit), roughly equivalent to "cause X to cause Y to Z," as in her example. (It would be something like, "You can cause the savarin to cause the syrup to be absorbed.")

[3] Some other examples of the same instability in colloquial English:

a. (Given to me by Martha Pennington)

That novel hits hard.

Notice, here, the necessity for the adverb.

b. (Robert Towne, quoted in California Magazine, May, 1982, p. 20)

I was like a guy whose arm is only good enough to pitch a few innings. I could not sustain.

c. (Teen-ager on TV drama, many times)

It's all right. I can handle.

(I mention all these cases to point to a trend I see for the future. I am not, it need hardly be said, advocating that these marginal forms be taught in the ESL classroom, although the teacher should be prepared to comment on them if a student brings them in.)

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